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ABSTRACT

This digest suggests ways that elementary and secondary magnet schools in urban settings are perceived to provide a superior education, offers an evaluation of their effectiveness, and looks at issues for policymakers that arise from the magnet's success. Magnet schools appeal to families and students for the following reasons: (1) program coherence; (2) a safer, more orderly climate, an environment that is conducive to learning, and an image of excellence; (3) a sense of shared enterprise and a committed, enthusiastic faculty and student body; (4) a focus on career preparation; (5) a committed, charismatic principal; (6) implementation of educational reforms; and (7) school autonomy. The answer to whether or not these schools are actually better than regular zoned schools is not clear. Some studies indicate that magnets produce test scores above their district average. Other studies indicate that there is great diversity of quality among magnet schools. In addition, some magnet schools have exceptionally good records with inner-city student populations producing very low dropout rates and very high graduation rates. Issues arising from the existence and success of magnet schools are outlined for policymakers and include the following: (1) student creaming (magnets succeed because they have all the best students); (2) resource hogging (magnets draw scarce resources away from regular schools); and (3) elitism. Included are six references. (JB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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IMPROVING URBAN EDUCATION WITH MAGNET SCHOOLS

Despite the wide variety of magnet schools and programs, magnets differ from "regular" or "zoned" schools in three principal ways: (1) magnets have a unified curriculum based on a special theme or method of instruction; (2) enrollment is open to students beyond the geographic attendance zone; and (3) students and parents choose the school.

Magnets were developed in large urban districts in the 1970s primarily as an aid in desegregating schools. The idea was to create schools so good that they would draw a racial cross-section of students out of the segregated neighborhood boundaries, avoiding the political opposition engendered by mandatory busing.

Virtually all magnets now have long waiting lists, despite that, in many, students have to travel long distances to school, the class day is longer, and the work is harder than in nonmagnets. Moreover, some are in run-down neighborhoods; some have large pupil/teacher ratios; and some are in decaying, depressing buildings. In the successful Fashion Industries High School in New York City, for example, classrooms and hallways have not been painted since 1940 (Mitchell, Russell, & Benson, 1989).

What, then, draws so many students to magnets? This digest suggests ways that magnet schools are perceived to provide a superior education.

The Appeal of Magnet Schools

1. Program coherence. Magnets have a specialized core curriculum or specialized pedagogy. The consistency of the theme or method of teaching, and the identification of staff with its theme, curriculum, methods, goals, and activities all mesh to form a coherent whole.

2. A safer, more orderly climate; an environment conducive to learning; and an image of excellence. Magnets have a strong commitment to parent involvement, and they try to mold student attitudes and values. As a result, magnets attract better-motivated students, which reinforces the favorable school atmosphere.

3. A sense of shared enterprise and a committed, enthusiastic faculty and student body. Because of the school's nurturing atmosphere and its image of excellence, and because more students apply than get accepted, students who are admitted, and teachers who teach in a magnet, feel special about themselves and their school.

4. Career preparation. The school's focus on an occupation or a field of study — and the attendant job prospects — gives students a sense of direction and lets them justify to themselves, their parents, and their peers the effort they put into schoolwork.

5. A committed, charismatic principal.

6. Implementation of educational reforms. Magnets are frequently associated with reform measures such as contextual teaching, cooperative learning, teacher collegiality, and an absence of tracking.

7. School autonomy. Staff at most magnets are relatively free to solve their own problems in their own way, without needing approval from the school district. This independence contributes to the feeling among students and staff that the school is their special, unique creation.

Not all magnets have all of these characteristics, of course, and they are not totally free of constraints. Like other schools, magnets must meet city and state requirements in areas such as curriculum, student body diversity, and the selection, hiring, and retention of teachers. They are also, like other schools, subject to state and local budget allocations and the priorities established for those allocations.

Are Magnet Schools Better Than Regular, Zoned Schools?

The answer is not clear-cut. Two reports, both using 1983 data on 45 magnets in 15 urban districts, came up with different emphases. Blank (1990) stressed the educational achievement of magnets, reporting that 80 percent of the magnet schools had average reading and math achievement scores above their district average.

Dentler (1990a), conversely, concluded that while a few magnets were exceptionally good, "[M]ost magnets, like most nonmagnets, vary tremendously in their ability to [deliver high educational quality]" (p. 70). As support, he cited data from the 32 schools for which there were reading and/or math achievement scores:

- 26 of the 32 magnets equalled or exceeded the mean reading scores for their districts, 14 exceeded the district average by 10 or more points, and 7 exceeded it by at least 30 points. However, the reading score of 6 magnets was below average.
- Most magnets equalled or exceeded district averages in math, 13 of them by 10 points or more, and 6 by at least 30 points. However, seven fell below average in mathematics.

Hill, Foster, & Gendler's 1990 study of inner-city public and Catholic schools included three magnet ("focus") schools. The Catholic schools included New York's Partnership Program, which pays tuition for public students to attend inner-city Catholic high schools. Most of the

students selected for the Partnership Program were African American or Puerto Rican, from single-parent welfare homes, and had poor academic records.

Hill et al. (1990) found that the focus and the Catholic schools far exceeded the "zoned" schools in graduation rates; percentages of students completing an academically demanding college prep course; percentages of students taking the SAT; and SAT scores.

Some magnets have exceptionally good records with inner-city student populations. Mitchell, Russell, & Benson (1989) selected nine exemplary magnets and found attendance rates higher and dropout rates lower than at most schools in their districts. In Chicago, where the high school dropout rate was 45 percent, the rate at the School for Agricultural Sciences — 89 percent African American and Hispanic — was less than 2 percent. The Manhattan Center for Science and Math, where 98 percent of its students were African American or Hispanic and over three-fourths were from low-income families, the dropout rate was under 2 percent, and 97 percent of its graduates enroll in college.

Issues for Policymakers

The very success of magnet schools raises a central question of whether their success comes at the expense of nonmagnets.

Student creaming. Are magnets successful, for example, because they draw the best students from other schools? Magnets do draw to their halls — and away from nonmagnets — better, more highly motivated students.

But it is equally evident that pedagogical and administrative features of magnets produce powerful effects in and of themselves. Their focus, organizational cohesiveness, strong leadership by the principal, and relative freedom from central office rules and procedures are highly correlated with improved achievement scores.

Furthermore, the use of selective admissions criteria varies. According to 1983 data cited by Dentler (1990b), nearly two-thirds of the magnets were selective in their admission of students on criteria other than race or ethnicity. More recently, Blank (1990) found that only 15 percent of magnets used "highly selective" criteria such as test scores. But even when a magnet school has no such admissions criteria, most of the students are select: with very rare exceptions, students with failing grades, or records of bad behavior or truancy, do not get selected for magnets.

However, Dentler's 1983 data found that half of the magnets with the highest achievement scores were not at all selective (Dentler, 1990a). Hill et al. found considerable success at magnets and Catholic schools even when the students had previous poor academic records, and the better results were not caused by differences in curricula, teacher traits, or student backgrounds. The key factors were a clearly defined purpose and the organizational cohesion and flexibility to pursue that purpose.

Resource hogging. Another concern is whether magnets draw scarce resources away from other schools. They cost more, particularly high schools, and some require heavy capital outlays. While Mitchell et al. (1989) found the difference in operating and recurring costs between magnets and nonmagnets "relatively small," McDonnell said that, "Magnets cost from 10 to 12 percent more than traditional schools" (1989, p. 2). But Chabotar (1988, cited in Dentler, 1990a) found that the cost differentials decline over time as start-up costs are absorbed. Still, some magnets provide quality education even when they face the same resource problems as nonmagnets.

Elitism. A broader issue centers around a key strength of magnets — their ability to focus on student outcomes and on a unique mission. Nonmagnets have diffuse missions, a great variety of programs, and "are controlled by piecemeal demands, rules, claimed entitlements, and contractual provisions" (Hill et al., 1990, p. 38). However, they have diffuse missions and a variety of programs because the many constituencies with a stake in public schooling demand them. These demands are legitimate, and a large, unanswered question is whether magnets succeed *because* the regular public schools are left with the burden of responding to these contingencies.

— Morton Inger

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